CHORDS 101

BY RICK GARTNER

Chords are fundamental elements in the musical vocabulary of guitar players. The theoretical complexities and the manual contortions involved in the playing of some chords can bring a cold sweat to the brows of even experienced musicians. But just as with any branch of musical knowledge, there is an unintimidating place to begin, and there is always something more to learn.

Chord diagrams should convey information about which strings should be held down and where, which should be played open, and which should not be played at all. Unfortunately, a *Three Chords That Ruled The World* type of songbook may not include all of the necessary information, and a *Four Billion Guitar Chords* style book may overwhelm you with excess information. But if you first concentrate on learning a few properly fingered chord positions, you can avoid frustration and maximize the payoff of your practice time.

In the chord diagrams in Ex. 1, the vertical lines represent the strings, with the lowest-sounding strings on the left, and the horizontal lines represent the frets. The thick horizontal line on the top is the nut, the notched fitting that guides the strings from the fretboard to the

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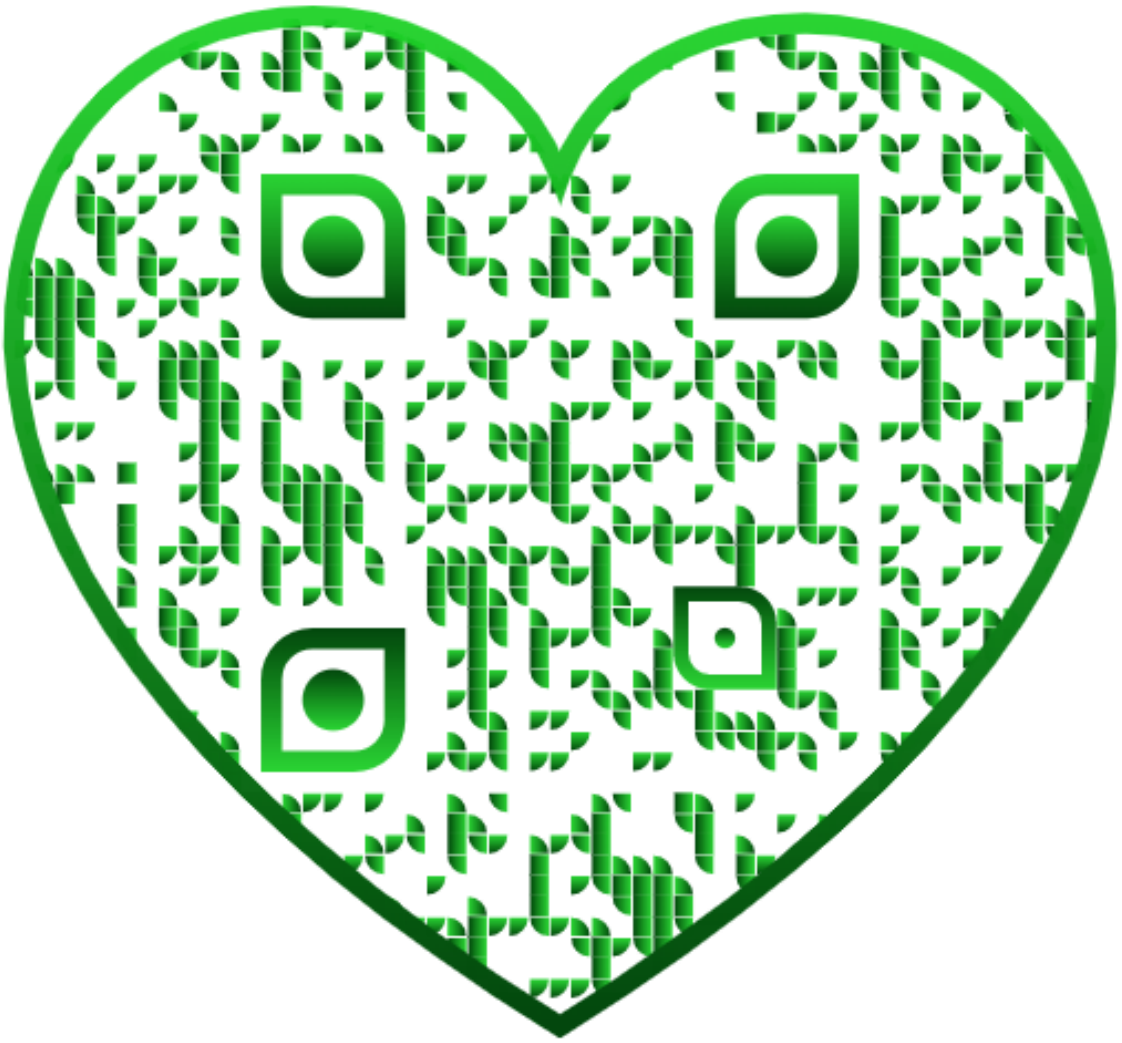
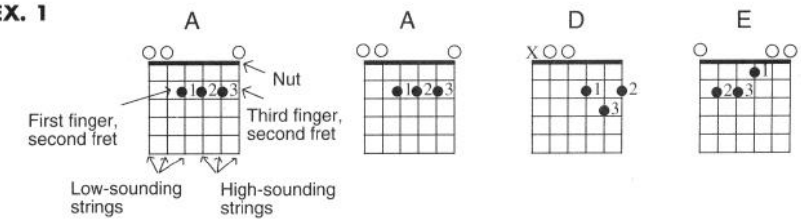


tuning pegs. The line below it represents the first fret.

The dots tell you which strings to hold down, and at what fret. The number to the right of each dot specifies the left-hand finger that should stop the string, index through pinky being numbered 1 through 4, respectively. An "O" at the top of the diagram indicates a string that is to be played open, while an "X" indicates a string that should not be played.

EX. 1

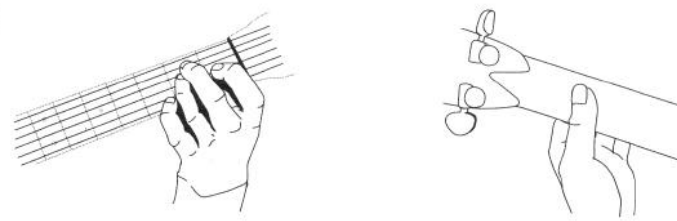


Chord diagrams follow this standard form wherever they appear. If the orientation is confusing at first, hold your guitar vertically so the fretboard faces you in order to duplicate the perspective. Sometimes you may encounter a horizontally oriented fretboard diagram, which is usually used for illustrating scales. Just keep your eye on the nut, and you'll be fine.

It's important to start off with the proper left-hand position since it has a significant effect on tone and finger movement. There are several rules of left-hand positioning that are essential in the development of good technique, and getting started correctly will save you from having to waste time correcting faulty technique later on. A few basic left-hand concepts:

1. Fingers should be arched at the joints so that the fingertips come down squarely on the strings (Ex. 2). This is the opposite of "flat-fingered" playing, which decreases mobility and tends to bend or pull the strings, causing the notes to sound out of tune.

EX. 2



However, it is necessary to flatten the first finger when playing *barre* chords, in which you stop two or more strings simultaneously.

2. Fingers should contact the strings just slightly behind the frets; the farther away from the fret you press your finger, the more pressure is required to stop the string, and the likelihood of fret-buzzing is increased. But in some situations, such as the *A* chord in Ex. 1, it is impossible to stop all the notes immediately adjacent to the frets because of the complexity and the spatial requirements of certain fingering combinations.

3. The thumb should stay near the middle of the back side of the neck, approximately opposite the first and second fingers (Ex. 2). The thumb provides leverage and a point from which your hand can pivot. With your thumb wrapped around the neck, you lose this advantage.

4. Fingers should hover close to the strings when not fretting a note. Pulling fingers farther away from the fretboard actually takes more energy than leaving them close to the strings, and also increases the distance you must move them to bring them into action. Economy of motion is a goal to which all guitarists should strive.

5. Your left arm should hang in a natural, relaxed manner. Your elbow should not

rest against your body, but should be just far enough away to allow your hand to attack the fretboard at approximately a 90-degree angle.

The most important thing to remember when you play chords is that each note must be pressed down as a unit, not separately. (There are exceptions to this rule, which you'll encounter later. At first, though, it's critical to make all notes in your chords sound simultaneously.) Here's an exercise that I call the "slam-down drill" that is very helpful in establishing the habit of pressing down each chord as a unit.

First, press down an *A* chord. Second, lift your fingers off the strings about a half-inch as a unit, keeping the chord formation. Third, press your fingers back down onto the strings, firmly and quickly, keeping the formation. If any of your fingers miss the proper position in the chord, correct them and repeat the drill.

When you feel comfortable with the *A* chord, do the same exercise with the *D* and *E* chords. Then practice the slam-down drill while changing chords. Start with *A*, lift, and press down the *D* chord. Release, then press down the *E* chord. Keep it slow, and correct any mistakes as you go.

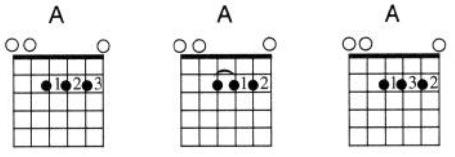
The next step is to strum as you do the drill. Keep your strum even and in steady rhythm; don't stop your strum if you miss a chord. Force your left hand to catch up with your right.

After a bit of practice, you'll probably start to feel comfortable with these basic chord positions. If not, you may want to consider alternate fingerings. There may be several possible fingerings for a chord, and which you choose should depend on the comfort of your hand and which fingering works best with the chords that precede and follow.

The size of your hand and the width of your instrument's neck have a significant effect on whether a particular fingering feels comfortable. A classical (nylon-string) guitar has a considerably wider neck (about 20%) than a steel-string guitar. Consequently, playing chords on a classical guitar often requires that you make longer reaches, but the wider fretboard allows you more room to maneuver on closely bunched fingering combinations. How that affects your playing depends on the size and shape of your hand. For example, a person with large hands usually finds the open *A* chord difficult to play, especially within the confines of a steel-string fretboard.

Ex. 3 shows three different fingerings for the basic *A* chord. The first is the most commonly used, and the other two have fingering adjustments that make it easier

EX. 3



for a person with large hands. In the middle diagram, the curved line surrounding the two adjacent dots indicates that both strings are to be pressed down with the same finger (the first finger in this case). Of course, you'll have to flatten your first finger to hold both strings down.

The most comfortable fingering is not necessarily the one to choose. From a musical and technical point of view, two of the most important things to consider are: Which fingering best facilitates changing to other chords, and which fingering allows you to throw in embellishments or melodic material with your left hand? The *G* chord provides a good example for these musical considerations.

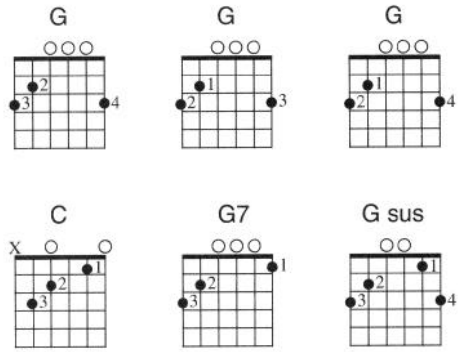
In Ex. 4 there are three fingerings for the basic *G* chord. I strongly recommend the first, although many players use the second with good results. The third is some-

times taught to beginners simply because it is easier, but this fingering is very awkward from a musical and technical standpoint. I only include it as an example of a bad habit that many players learn for the sake of expediency.

I recommend the first fingering because it best facilitates two common chord changes, *G* to *C*, and *G* to *G7*. Much less finger movement is required to make those chord changes when you use the first fingering. The *G* to *G7* chord change is the best example—moving from the first *G* fingering to *G7* requires the changing of just one note, while you must shift the position of your entire hand to make the change using the second *G* fingering.

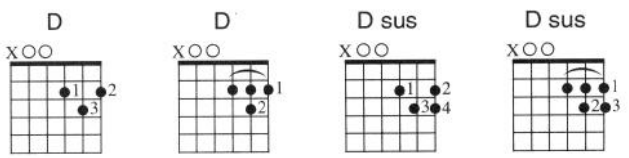
A very lovely embellishment, *G* suspended (*Gsus*), is also more readily available from the first *G* fingering. On the bottom line of Ex. 4 are diagrams for *C*, *G7*, and *Gsus* chords. Try changing to those chords from each of the first two *G* fingerings and compare the difference in the movement needed. Most people who shy away from the first *G* fingering do so because their fourth finger (the pinky) just won't behave. That's really not a good enough reason, because with practice you can learn to control your little finger.

EX. 4



Let's take a look at one more chord, *D*. There are two fingerings for the *D* chord in Ex. 5, as well as a diagram for the *Dsus* embellishment. Both of the *D* fingerings work well, and each has a special advantage. The first allows you to easily lift your finger off the first string, which gives you another embellishment to the *D* chord. The second fingering allows you to reach out to the 5th fret on the top string (with your pinky), which is a nice addition to the sound of the basic *D* chord. To play the *Dsus*, add your fourth finger to the first *D* fingering or add your third to the second *D* fingering, as shown in Ex. 5.

EX. 5



Of course, any decision about fingering is entirely your own. But keep in mind that any song will require at least a couple of chord changes. Although one fingering for a chord may seem easier by itself, it may prove to be very awkward when you try to change chords in the middle of a song. Your decisions about fingering should be based partially on what feels comfortable, and partially on what makes the most musical sense.

Now you're on your way to building a solid foundation for playing chords. I've introduced only a few chords so far, and while they actually can serve as all you need to accompany a large number of songs, there will come a time when you want to play more chords. One way to increase your chord vocabulary with a minimum of effort is to learn a couple of movable formations, which you can move from

position to position.

Before we start moving things around on your fretboard, let's take a look at how notes are named on the guitar. Ex 5.1 shows the note names for the first 12 frets on the *A* string. Note that some fret locations have two names, and others have only one. Also note that while the single-named locations seem to alternate with the double ones, the pattern appears irregular. The reason for this will become apparent to you if you look at the keyboard of a piano or synthesizer. Much of the language of music was contrived to describe what happens on a keyboard, not on a fretboard, and this is just one notable example.

EX. 5.1

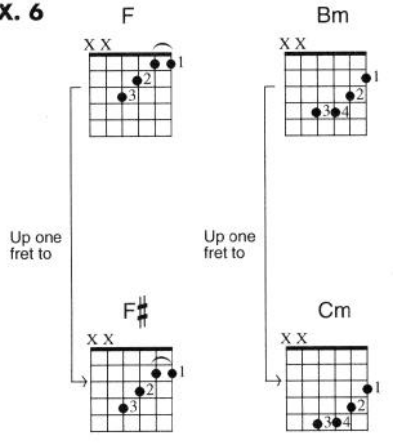
A—A#(B♭)—B—C—C#(D♭)—D—D#(E♭)—E—F—F#(G♭)—G—G#(A♭)—A

The frets on your guitar are spaced at half-step intervals. You can identify any note on a given string if you know the name of the open string, locate it on the chromatic scale in Ex. 5.1, and then count upwards the same number of frets as the note in question is from the nut. Suppose that you want to identify the note located at the 3rd fret on the sixth string, which is the low *E* string. Locate *E* on Ex. 5.1, and count up three half-steps, remembering that *F#/G♭* count as only one half-step. Presto! The note you're looking for is *G*. A similar approach will work to determine the name of a movable chord as you move it up or down the neck.

For a chord to be movable, its fingering must allow it to preserve the same relationship of the notes as you move it. A chord that uses open strings is not movable, as the open strings would sound the same note as you moved the rest of the chord. The quality of a chord doesn't change as you move it, only the letter name. A *C* minor chord will still be a minor chord no matter where you place it; it just won't be a *C* minor chord anymore.

The easiest movable chords to finger are those that are played on the first three or four strings. Ex. 6 shows both a major and a minor chord formation. Just as we identified a single note by using the chromatic scale, we can identify the letter name of a movable chord anywhere on the neck. For example, if you move the *F* chord up one fret, it becomes an *F#* (or *G♭*) chord. Move it up another fret, and it becomes a *G* chord. Similarly, if you move the *Bm* chord up one fret, it becomes a *Cm* chord. It's still a minor chord; just the letter name changes. If you move it up another fret, the result is a *C#m* chord.

EX. 6



Perhaps there's a song that you always dismissed as being too hard because it had an *F#* chord in it. You can solve many such problems by becoming familiar with the chromatic scale and just one or two movable chord formations. ■